

## Austin Farrer and C.S. Lewis

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C.S. Lewis returned to Christianity in 1931, the same year that Farrer returned to Oxford from his curacy in West Yorkshire to become chaplain and tutor at St Edmund Hall. We do not know when they met; the first record of joint endeavours comes from Trinity Term 1942, when Austin Farrer (by then chaplain and tutor at Trinity College) gave his first talk at the Socratic Club, over which Lewis presided. The talk was entitled ‘Did Christ rise from the dead?’. A few months later, Lewis gave the first of several sermons on miracles in London, centring on the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. This eventually grew into his book *Miracles*.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis and Farrer became trusted colleagues. When Lewis was writing the radio talks that eventually became *Mere Christianity*, he circulated the manuscripts to representatives of the major branches of Christianity, and it is thought that Farrer was his Anglican *ensor libri*.<sup>2</sup> From 1942 until Lewis’s move to Cambridge, Farrer spoke at Lewis’s Socratic Club sixteen times – fewer only than Lewis himself.<sup>3</sup> The Socratic Club remained their main meeting place for ten years. Lewis’s closest ‘circle’ was, of course, the Inklings; and it is perhaps of interest that Farrer, despite the poetic mind that John Hick so rightly praises in his foreword to *A Reflective Faith*, did not attend Inklings meetings. Farrer was, however, in Basil Mitchell’s later account, ‘the central figure’ of the Metaphysicals, which Rob MacSwain calls the philosophical counterpart to the more literary Inklings. Founded in 1946 by Eric Mascall at Christ Church, the Metaphysicals were a group of mostly Anglican philosophers and theologians who, according to Mitchell, ‘shared a common dissatisfaction with the restrictions which tacitly governed philosophical discussion at a time when “metaphysical” was the rudest word in the philosopher’s vocabulary.’<sup>4</sup> (Mitchell adds that ‘indeed a major reason for the rest of us in the early days to go on meeting was to make sure that Farrer

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<sup>1</sup> A version of Lewis’s September 1942 sermon ‘Miracles’ was published in *The Guardian* on 2 October 1942, and reprinted in *God in the Dock* (London: Fontana, 1979), pp. 1-17. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* was published by G. Bles in 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Suggested in Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> Noted in Michael Ward, ‘The Son and the Other Stars: Christology and Cosmology in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis’, unpublished PhD thesis [University of St Andrews, 2005], p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Basil Mitchell, ‘Introduction’ to Basil Mitchell (ed.), *Faith and Logic: Oxford Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1957), p. 1. The book contains essays by several members of the Metaphysicals, including an introduction and essay by Mitchell, and two essays by Farrer. Mitchell states that the group began in 1946—his first year teaching philosophy—in ‘Staking a Claim for Metaphysics,’ found in Harriet A. Harris and Christopher J. Insole (eds), *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 21.

continued to work seriously in philosophy and not spend too much of his time in New Testament exegesis.<sup>5</sup>) Lewis was not of their number, though Professor Diogenes Allen of Princeton Theological Seminary reports that Lewis attended at least one meeting of the Metaphysicals at which Allen himself was also present,<sup>6</sup> and Basil Mitchell suggests that he may have attended others.<sup>7</sup>

The Socratic Club seems to have been an important intersection of Inklings and Metaphysicals, and it was a Metaphysical, Basil Mitchell, who succeeded Lewis as the club's second president.<sup>8</sup> Farrer, in a now famous account of the Socratic Club, recalls Lewis's and his joint endeavours there:

[Lewis] was a bonny fighter. His writing gave the same impression as his appearances in public debate. I was occasionally called upon to stop a gap in the earlier programmes of Lewis' Socratic Club. Lewis was president, but he was not bound to show up. I went in fear and trembling, certain to be caught out in debate and to let down the side. But there Lewis would be, snuffing the imminent battle and saying 'Aha!' at the sound of the trumpet. My anxieties rolled away. Whatever ineptitudes I might commit, he would maintain the cause; and nobody could put Lewis down.<sup>9</sup>

There are other contexts in which Farrer and Lewis might have been expected to meet but did not, and indeed their association seems not to have been very close until the 1950's. For example, Lewis does not seem to have attended Farrer's 1948 Bampton Lectures,<sup>10</sup> and only engaged Farrer's work widely the following decade. He did not read *The Rebirth of Images*,<sup>11</sup> and Farrer's books in Lewis's library all date from the 1950's and 1960's: *Lord I Believe* (1955), *A Short Bible* (1956), and *Saving Belief* (1964).<sup>12</sup> The latter two, of course, carry his blurbs. Of his other works, Lewis notes that he has read *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (1961) 'with great enjoyment'.<sup>13</sup>

The main catalyst for a warmer and more intimate association seems to have been Joy Davidman. Austin and Kay were one of the few couples in Oxford to have made friends with Jack and Joy as a couple, and Kay became one of Joy's closest friends. Austin was one of the witnesses

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, 'Staking a Claim for Metaphysics,' p. 25. Noted in Rob MacSwain, 'A Fertile Friendship: C.S. Lewis and Austin Farrer', *The Chronicle of the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society* 5, no. 2 (2008), pp. 22-44.

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication to Rob MacSwain, reported by MacSwain at a talk to the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society on 29 April 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Reported by MacSwain at a talk to the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society on 29 April 2008.

<sup>8</sup> See Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1974), pp. 217-18.

<sup>9</sup> Austin Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (London: G. Bles, 1965), pp. 23-43; here p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis seems only to have read the published lectures; see his letter to Sister Penelope on 1 August 1949, in C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, ed. Walter Hooper, 3 volumes (London: HarperCollins, 2000-2006), vol. 2, p. 961. (Hereafter cited as CL, followed by volume and page number.)

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Sister Penelope, 1 August 1949, CL 2, p. 961.

<sup>12</sup> Now in the Wade Center, Wheaton College. Noted in Ward, 'The Son and Other Stars', p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Austin Farrer, 29 December 1961, in CL 3, p. 1308.

at Lewis and Joy's civil marriage of convenience at the Registry on St Giles in 1956. In 1960, he gave Joy the sacrament of reconciliation on her death-bed, and she asked him to read her funeral service, which he did at the Oxford Crematorium. There is a touching letter from Lewis to Austin and Kay a week after Joy's death, telling them that Joy had asked him on her deathbed to give her fur coat to Kay. 'I know it's far too big for her', she said, 'but she could use it as a present for someone else.'<sup>14</sup> And Lewis adds: 'She loved you both very much. And getting to know you both better is one of the many permanent gains I have got from my short married life.' That year, Lewis dedicated *Reflections on the Psalms* to Austin and Kay.

Lewis admired the Farrers' hospitality and refinement. Walter Hooper, Lewis's private secretary in his last year of life, recalls how in 1963, when Lewis and he had Austin and Kay over for tea at the Kilns, Lewis said afterwards: 'It was like entertaining elves.' In July that year, Lewis was hospitalized with a heart attack, and it was Farrer whom the doctors informed, along with Lewis's stepson Douglas and Walter Hooper. It was also Farrer to whom Walter brought Lewis's parish priest, Ronald Head, to discuss his condition. In November of that year, Farrer gave Lewis the last sacraments while in hospital. His funeral – a very private affair – was conducted by the vicar at Holy Trinity Headington, who had been Lewis's parish priest since 1952. Austin read the lesson. At the much larger Memorial Service in the Chapel of Magdalen College the following month, he preached the memorial sermon, which is collected in Farrer's sermons.<sup>15</sup>

This is about as much as can be gleaned about Lewis and Farrer's personal association from extant written sources. Their joint ventures in the Socratic Club and their comments on each other's work make clear how important mutual encouragement and support was to both, particularly in an Oxford increasingly inhospitable to their way of thinking. But it is that way of thinking itself – sufficiently close that it might without exaggeration be called a joint intellectual legacy – which is the most interesting aspect of their association. A number of (mainly posthumously) published evaluations of each other's thought provide a good starting point for assessing that legacy.

Lewis's responses to Farrer, both in print and in correspondence, are almost unreservedly positive. Although Lewis gave Austin's wife Kay relatively detailed criticisms of her fiction, only one minor criticism of Austin is recorded.<sup>16</sup> This is probably due mainly to the fact that Kay's work fell within Lewis's professional purview as a literary critic. It is strictly as literature that he critiqued her work, offering such retorts as the complaint that one of her figures 'speaks like a Charles

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<sup>14</sup> Letter of 21 July 1960, CL 3, p. 1174.

<sup>15</sup> Austin Farrer, 'In His Image: in commemoration of C. S. Lewis', in Farrer, *The Brink of Mystery*, ed. Charles C. Conti (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 44-46.

<sup>16</sup> In a letter to Austin Farrer, 29 December 1961, CL 3, p. 1308.

Williams character'. Austin's work, by contrast, was beyond Lewis's expert criticism, because it was that of a professional philosophical theologian, which Lewis keenly knew himself not to be. This does not mean that Lewis was not sometimes school-masterish in his off-hand appraisals: in 1949, having read *The Glass of Vision*, he noted in a letter to Sister Penelope, 'I think he is alpha +'.<sup>17</sup> But generally, he assumed the position of a learner. One of Lewis's most amusing remarks is also the most telling in this regard. Reading Farrer's introduction to his *Short Bible*, Lewis immediately wrote to Kay: 'I don't know that I ever got so much from so few pages before: deepest problems disarmed with a turn of the wrist. If only real theologians like him had started doing *oeuvres de vulgarisation* a little earlier, the world wd. have been spared C. S. L.'<sup>18</sup>

In his published endorsements of Farrer's work, Lewis celebrated Farrer's intellectual brilliance and spiritual maturity, and the distinctive restraint and grace that flowed from it. In 1960, he wrote a preface for *A Faith of Our Own*, the US edition of *Said or Sung*. (As Rob McSwain notes, a similar fate of re-titling befell Archbishop Michael Ramsey's history *From Gore to Temple* – that is, from Charles Gore to William Temple – the same year. The American publisher renamed the book *An Era in Anglican Theology* due to concerns that American readers might think a book entitled *From Gore to Temple* was about Old Testament animal sacrifice.) Lewis's praise is worth quoting, both for its aptitude and for what it reveals about what Lewis valued. It notes that books like this are rare, because it is not often that a theologian of such learning comes to us 'simply as a priest', combining such theological depth with such simplicity of expression. Farrer's sermons, Lewis writes,

lead us through a structure of thoughts so delicately balanced that a false word, even a false tone, might land us in disaster. Opposite errors threaten from both sides, so that the author has to tread a path as narrow as a hair. Yet I believe the simple reader will be perfectly capable of following them and will remain quite unaware of all the shoals and rocks that have been avoided. When the author was really dancing among eggs, he will seem to have been strolling across a lawn.<sup>19</sup>

The image is as characteristic of Lewis as it is descriptive of Farrer. And Lewis concludes, shrewdly and with a hint of self-criticism:

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Sister Penelope, 1 August 1949, CL 2, p. 961.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Kay Farrer, 20 May 1956, CL 3, p. 754.

<sup>19</sup> Preface to Austin Farrer, *A Faith of Our Own* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 7.

Perhaps, after all, it is not so difficult to explain why books like this are rare. For one thing, the work involved is very severe; not the work on this or that [piece] but the life-long work without which they could not even have been begun. For another, they demand something like a total conquest of those egoisms which—however we try to mince the matter—play so large a part in most impulses to authorship. To talk to us thus Dr Farrer makes himself almost nothing, almost nobody. To be sure, in the event, his personality stands out from the pages as clearly as that of any author; but this is one of heaven's jokes—nothing makes a man so noticeable as vanishing.

Lewis loved this appearance of self-forgetting in Farrer until the last. On *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, he wrote to his friend: 'You once said that you wrote with difficulty, but no one would guess it: this is full of felicities that sound as unsought as wildflowers...'.<sup>20</sup>

Farrer's appraisals of Lewis were more detailed and critical. They are contained primarily in two texts: 'In His Image', the 1963 memorial sermon he preached in Lewis's honour; and 'The Christian Apologist', an assessment written shortly after Lewis's death for a collection published by his editor, Jocelyn Gibb.<sup>21</sup> Both texts make clear that Farrer did not regard Lewis as a philosopher, and only to some extent as a theologian. This was not intended as a disparagement, but as a professional observation. Academic philosophy, Farrer noted, is 'an ever-shifting, never-ending public discussion, and a man who drops out of the game drops out of philosophy'. Lewis, he thought, did to a significant extent drop out. Following the end of his philosophical education in the mid-1920's, he never became 'quite at home in what we may call our post-positivist era'. As a consequence, Farrer did not think that Lewis's 'philosophical commendations of theism [could] usefully be recommended to puzzled undergraduate philosophers of the present day. His literary, his moral, and his spiritual development was continuous; his philosophical experience belonged to the time of his conversion.'<sup>22</sup>

Farrer cites the example of Lewis's philosophical idealism, manifesting itself in a construal of humans primarily as intellectual agents with a moral will. This understanding, Farrer thought, led Lewis to underestimate 'the full involvement of the reasonable soul in a random and perishable system', and so distorted his approach to such things as the problem of pain.<sup>23</sup> Farrer himself was much readier than Lewis to attribute human suffering to evolutionary vicissitudes, and to

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis to Farrer, 29 December 1961, CL 3, p. 1308.

<sup>21</sup> Published in Farrer, *The Brink of Mystery*, and Gibb (ed.), *Light on C.S. Lewis*, respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', pp. 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', p. 41.

acknowledge that the ‘cross-accidents’ to which man’s ‘identity with a physical body’ necessarily make him liable may not only attack his health but also ‘undermine the very stuff of personal life’.<sup>24</sup>

However, if Farrer regarded Lewis firmly as an apologist rather than a theologian, he thought him the most brilliant apologist of their age. This brilliance lay not primarily in Lewis’s ability to counter the weaknesses of his opponents, though he did this with great dexterity. Rather, it lay in the texture of the vision which he presented – usually without fanfare – of his own side.

It was [his] feeling intellect, [his] intellectual imagination which made the strength of his religious writings. Some of those unsympathetic to his convictions saw him as an advocate who bluffed a public eager to be deceived, by the presentation of uncertain arguments as cogent demonstrations. Certainly he was a debater, and thought it fair to make the most of the case: and there were those who were reassured by seeing that the case could be made. But his real power was not proof, it was depiction. There lived in his writings a Christian universe which could be both thought and felt, in which he was at home, and in which he made his reader at home.<sup>25</sup>

In the best passages even of a straightforwardly apologetic work like *Problem of Pain*, Farrer finds, ‘we think we are listening to an argument, [when] in fact we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction’.<sup>26</sup> It is with Lewis as Lewis thought it was with Milton, that we must resist ‘supposing the poet was inculcating a rule when in fact he was enamoured of a perfection’.<sup>27</sup>

This brings us to the heart of what Lewis and Farrer owe to each other, and we to them. Both think that apologetics, as well as philosophy and theology, are at their most fundamental concerned with a *vision* of the world, and therefore address the imagination as much as reason. This agreement also breeds their most fertile disagreements. Farrer is more explicitly aware than Lewis that to address the imagination is a risky business, and his most substantial criticisms of Lewis concern this risk. Thus, Farrer argues that Lewis’s peculiar merit is his ‘massive entirety of view’.<sup>28</sup> However, he immediately goes on to ask whether Lewis does not achieve this ‘massive entirety’ of a Christian world ‘by living in a prescientific world’<sup>29</sup> – in other words, whether he does not buy his vision at the price of denying scientific discovery.

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<sup>24</sup> Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Farrer, ‘In His Image’, pp. 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Farrer, ‘The Christian Apologist’, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Farrer, ‘The Christian Apologist’, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Farrer, ‘The Christian Apologist’, p. 27.

If we read Farrer's essay on Lewis side by side with his own *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, written only five years earlier, we see that what he primarily has in mind is not Lewis's expressed scepticism of modern scientific practice or philosophy. Rather, it is Lewis's defence of a historical Fall and a literal devil. Farrer, unlike Lewis, regards the devil as a myth. His view is well summed up in the dictum: 'The fable of Lucifer is certainly instructive, but it instructs us in the nature of human sin, not in its causes'.<sup>30</sup> 'The nature of sin is to be sheerly perverse – 'hideously effective' while being merely banal; 'miserably simple' in throwing 'away the greater good to embrace the less'. Human sin, Farrer concludes, can therefore 'do all the devil can do in making an absolute beginning of evil...at every moment of time'.<sup>31</sup>

Farrer similarly regards a historical Fall as both superfluous and ultimately unintelligible, mainly because animal predation and death preceded the emergence of humans. This would require Christians either to say that the entire ecosystem of the planet changed with the Fall (as indeed the Bible seems to claim in Genesis 9) or that the human Fall was not after all a radical occurrence, for '[i]f the animals were fallen already, it was as a fallen animal that man acquired the first rudiments of reason'.<sup>32</sup>

Farrer, in other words, regards the myths of Fall and the Devil as products of non-Christian mythology. In embracing them, he opines, Lewis's 'imagination has slipped from the leash of reason.' The force of Farrer's own rejection of these literal beliefs is betrayed by the uncharacteristic vehemence of his description:

His readers rub their eyes, and wonder what they are seeing – Lewis wrote fairy tales but surely he did not believe them!...It is aberrations of this kind, rather than merited attacks on materialist philosophy, which fix on Lewis the label 'antiscientific'. What a pity it is that by such superfluous unrealities he should furnish the public with excuses to evade the overwhelming realism of his moral theology!<sup>33</sup>

This quarrel flags a significant difference between Lewis and Farrer, all the more interesting because it is a difference within a broad similarity that distinguishes both from their contemporaries. This is their commitment to images as a central medium of apologetics – and not only apologetics, but of the biblical canon and abstract theological and metaphysical thought as well. The use of images, to both men, is not merely rhetorical or heuristic, but essential. First,

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<sup>30</sup> Farrer, *Love Almighty*, p. 141.

<sup>31</sup> Farrer, *Love Almighty*, p. 141.

<sup>32</sup> Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> Farrer, 'The Christian Apologist', p. 42.

because it is impossible to communicate – in most cases, even to apprehend – immaterial realities directly, but only through analogies.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, because it is by the imagination that humans project a *whole* into which the observable facts of the world fit – and that whole, which is imaginative because it is not itself observable, determines how they understand everything within it, and is therefore vital.<sup>35</sup>

Within this agreement, the friends' understandings and uses of images are subtly but decisively different. Farrer selects images carefully, and traces their significance to their sources or to the constraints of language. Lewis selects his images prodigally, and ascribes to their underlying appeal a metaphysical significance. The last section of this chapter observes this difference in Lewis and Farrer's treatment of myth, and their explicit discussions of images in biblical, theological and metaphysical thought.

A comparison of Farrer and Lewis on myth is particularly interesting because the main source texts are a set of essays that also represents one of our clearest instances of Lewis's direct influence on Farrer. They are Lewis's short essay 'Myth Became Fact' (1944) and Farrer's tantalizingly inverted 'Can Myth Be Fact?' (1945). Lewis wrote his 'Myth Became Fact' for the journal *World Dominion*, published by the World Dominion Movement, which was established in 1923 to promote 'widespread evangelism and the founding of the indigenous Church as the natural agent for the continuation of the work of evangelization and the development of all forms of Christian work on the field'.<sup>36</sup> (The journal was taken over from 1973 to 1976 by SPCK as *Frontier*, the result of a merger with Blackwell's *Frontier / The Christian news-letter*.) This was Lewis's second and last article for *World Dominion*, the first having been 'Religion: Reality or Substitute?' (1941). He was invited to address a World Dominion rally in London in the summer of 1946, but declined on the ground that he was 'an arguer not an exhorter and my target is the frankly irreligious audience'.<sup>37</sup> Farrer, by contrast, wrote his 'Can Myth Be Fact?' for the Socratic Club in Oxford, an audience much closer to Lewis' 'frankly irreligious audience' with which one can argue reasonably. Lewis's little piece runs to just over four pages, Farrer's to about double that length. He gave it sometime in or after February 1945, and it appeared in the 1945 issue of *The Socratic Digest*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See especially Lewis, 'Bluspels and Flalansferes', in *Rehabilitations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), and Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1948), ch. 4. This is a point made in detail thirty years later in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Weaver famously described this whole as a person's 'metaphysical dream'; Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>36</sup> Alexander McLeish, 'The World Dominion Movement: Its Ideals and Activities', *International Review of Mission* 23, no. 2 (1934), p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Thomas Wilkinson Riddle, 16 July 1946, CL 2, p. 718.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis's 'Myth Became Fact' was reprinted in *God in the Dock*, pp. 54-60; Farrer's 'Can Myth Be Fact?' was reprinted in Farrer, *Interpretation and Belief*, ed. Charles Conti (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 165-75.



Lewis argues in 'Myth Became Fact' that myths may teach us more than many sermons about the spiritual world, partly because they consciously open out a realm beyond the natural. He singles out the elevation and awe he has always felt at the myths of Balder and Odin, of gods dying and rising again. What is so remarkable about the Christian myth, he continues, is that it really happened, without thereby being reduced to humdrum ordinariness. On the contrary, in becoming fact, that myth revealed the ordinary world as part of a larger whole that is more like myth than it is like the marketplace, or even a dull Sunday service. What to the non-Christian seems a divided cosmos – with all that is real being dreary, and all that is interesting unreal – becomes whole to those immersed in the Christian story. It is not surprising that God should have put myths in the minds of the pagans, Lewis concludes, because as their creator he would wish to give them dreams of their salvation.

Farrer's argument in the first half of 'Can Myth Be Fact?' is ostensibly very similar, but significantly begins by setting the rise and demise of myth in its context. 'The reason why myths become current and maintain their hold', Farrer writes, 'is the expressiveness of their symbolism and the importance of what they symbolize'. They follow universal lines of reason. Presumably, 'simple-minded antiquity' took them for historical fact, since humans, Farrer explains, 'were not content with general principles – ...they wanted to feel the conviction that these principles were the actual working forces of the universe; and they found evidence for this in the record that at some time the powers in control of nature had expressed these principles in one perfectly clear, typical and significant event.' Later, humans came to disbelieve in their historical truth, and philosophers began to mine them for the 'profound but implicit wisdom of antiquity'. 'The mythic story no longer guarantees the general truths, as it did to the simpler age; on the contrary, the general truths must now be proved in their own right, and the validity of the myth depends on them.'

In the work of God, Farrer claims, there is no such divide between history and myth. The words of the Bible signify historical facts; but those facts themselves signify a supernatural meaning. This is because God 'controls facts no less completely, far more completely, indeed, than I control words. And so...God has what really is absolute freedom to shape historical events into an expression of his divine meaning.' Thus, humans 'may construct a myth expressive of divine truths as they conceive them, and the stuff of the myth will be words. God has constructed a myth expressive of the divine truths he intends to convey, and the stuff of the myth is facts.' Farrer illustrates this beautifully by going back to Genesis 1: for in the beginning, 'there were not two events, first the speaking, then the shining. The shining of the light was itself the speech, the utterance of God; facts do not *obey* God's words, they *are* his words.'

This discussion is only the preamble to Farrer's main point about the Christ myth, which is not only myth but also fact. But already this summary throws into relief a peculiarity of Lewis's account of which Lewis himself seems unaware. Either the claim that 'myth became fact' is addressed specifically to the present sceptical age, because for an earlier age (as Farrer, following contemporary anthropology, suggests), *all* myth was fact. In this case, the discovery of myth as fact follows a distinctively Romantic pattern, trading a young naïveté for a middle-aged scepticism and then for a double vision or second innocence. Or Lewis implies that the mythic pattern comes first: that what already existed as myth later became fact, rather than being, as the 'naïve' mind would think, a perceived fact also bearing revelatory significance. In this case, Lewis's polemic requires that pagan myths pre-existed Christianity, or at least that the human imagination has certain fixed forms – forms that are usually divided from the ordinary world, but in the incarnation as true myth are reconciled with it.

This second is the more likely reading, and explains why Lewis is so particular with his myths: only a very small handful actually fit his requirements. However, this poses an unacknowledged problem for him. Lewis claims that myths furnish the criteria for what is meaningful – that is, for *what* the incarnation reveals to be actual fact (rather than mere imagined meaning). But the historical corpus of myths is much more diffuse and varied than the few examples Lewis chooses, and he does not provide criteria for determining *which* myths carry the relevant meaning. As a consequence, the entire argument is in danger of being circular. Lewis wants the imagination to show the contours of meaning, to which the world seems (to the non-Christian) to be inadequate, but through Christ turns out after all to fulfil. But can that burden be carried by the imagination, without further criteria for which imaginative visions count and which do not? In other words, Lewis claims that the world is, after all, like a story; but like what story?

Farrer is much more definite. He relates Christ not to myth 'as such', in the way Lewis does, but specifically to Old Testament myth, especially that of Adam. It is the Bible which provides the imaginative forms that the Christ-event brings to life. This claim guides Farrer's entire biblical criticism. For him, not only the prophets' metaphors, but also the living realities of Israel including circumcision, Temple, and kingship, were not self-contained realities, but (ever more explicitly) *images* that became real in Christ. The religion of Israel always, he writes, tended towards either incarnation or idolatry; and the 'breath of inspiration' blew it towards the former. The work of the prophets, therefore, was above all so to purify and exalt 'the image that nothing merely natural will ever be able to embody it...and the act of soul by which this happens in them is a supernatural act, it is the process of the incarnation of God preparing its own way and casting its shadow

before'.<sup>39</sup> Farrer's 'myth made fact' is therefore of a very different nature than Lewis's. It is the Bible, with its divinely given myths and images, which draws the contours of meaning that Christ fulfils and makes real.

This difference informs their assessment of images more generally. As already indicated, both Farrer and Lewis think that in dealing with the non-material, it is necessary to deal in images, even if, as metaphors 'fossilize', their users forget that they are images. Indeed, Lewis thinks that this is one of the main dangers to thought. Those who remember that *anima* and *neshama*, the Latin and Hebrew words for 'soul', are at root metaphorical usages of their physical meaning of 'breath' will retain a certain humility in their presumed knowledge of the soul. Those who forget that 'soul' is, at heart, a metaphor, and think that the noun itself is a guarantee of a known reality, are worse off than the former.<sup>40</sup> Farrer, in *The Glass of Vision*, agrees: 'A man cannot apprehend anything without an act of imaginative creation'.<sup>41</sup>

Lewis's account of the significance of this phenomenon, however, is more far-reaching than Farrer's, and remains consistent throughout his life. He discusses images in two essays spanning the length of his career: 'Bluspels and Flalansferes' (1939) and 'The Language of Religion' (1960). In both, he argues that metaphors, like emotions, are the only means of communicating immaterial realities that are inwardly apprehended. 'The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by hints, similes, metaphors, and the use of those emotions (themselves not very important) which are pointers to it'.<sup>42</sup>

Lewis believes this irreducibility of metaphors to betoken a 'psycho-physical parallelism' of the universe.<sup>43</sup> In other words, he believes that metaphors spring from a sub-rational apprehension of the *analogical* nature of the world, a point he absorbed early in his intellectual development from his friend Owen Barfield.<sup>44</sup> Farrer is much more reticent. He affirms that there are mysteries of existence that must be acknowledged rather than, as they generally are in modern thought, dismissed; and that metaphysics (which works in images) is the description of those mysteries, rather than the solving of conventional problems.<sup>45</sup> But he would not go so far as to say that the analogies of the metaphysicians are ontological truths, as Lewis does. He ascribes them rather to

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<sup>39</sup> Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 135.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, 'Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare', in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 251-265. Originally published in *Rehabilitations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

<sup>41</sup> Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis, 'The Language of Religion', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 159-74; here p. 172.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, 'Bluspels and Flalansferes', p. 265.

<sup>44</sup> See especially Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (London: Faber, 1928).

<sup>45</sup> Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, p. 76.

the structure of language or thought: 'all thinking...is a movement, passing, as it were, from term to term.'<sup>46</sup> In describing a singular nature, language cannot but compare and analogize. In fact, Farrer says remarkably little about the origin of images, even Biblical images, which are always already given.

And here, I would venture, we have a needed though not yet an actual legacy, namely of Farrer as a corrective to Lewis's theological imagination, which in its exuberance sometimes makes its applicability difficult. Dorothy L. Sayers called Narnia 'the Absolutely Elsewhere', and she has a point. Unlike *The Hobbit*, it could be subtitled 'There...but How Back Again?'. Narnia's visions of noble kingship, of just war, and of a Saviour walking the earth may lift the soul and widen the heart, but it is far from clear how they can be translated out of their literary context into our messy political one.<sup>47</sup> Farrer's images are much less extravagant. They are marked by the asceticism that Lewis so praises in his friend. Both, I think, are necessary; but Lewis's cannot ultimately survive as Christian instruction without the correction of Farrer.

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<sup>46</sup> Farrer, *Glass of Vision*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>47</sup> See the discussion in Judith Wolfe, 'C.S. Lewis on Power', in *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis*, ed. Rob McSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 174-188.